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'71 underwater nuke test leaking

DOE promises to investigate radioactivity

By Keay Davidson
EXAMINER SCIENCE WRITER

Radioactivity is leaking into the Bering Sea from a 25-year-old underground nuclear bomb test in Alaska, the environmental group Greenpeace says.

The leakage is occurring on Am-

chitka Island, a national wildlife refuge that is "extremely rich biologically," said Greenpeace biologist Pamela Miller, who co-discovered the radioactivity during an expedition to the island.

The U.S. Department of Energy takes the Greenpeace report "very seriously" and will launch a special investigation, Energy Undersecretary Thomas Grumbley said in a conference call with several reporters Tuesday.

But there is no evidence of an imminent hazard to humans or Pa-

cific fisheries, said Grumbley and the Greenpeace scientists. Located southwest of Alaska, Amchitka Island has no permanent human inhabitants.

Conducted Nov. 6, 1971, the Amchitka blast was the biggest underground nuclear test in U.S. history. Its explosive force equaled 5 million tons (or 5 megatons) of TNT — 385 times as mighty as the bomb that destroyed Hiroshima. Scientists detonated the bomb a mile underground to comply with a 1963 treaty banning nuclear tests in the atmosphere.

The nuclear test was part of then-President Richard Nixon's controversial anti-ballistic missile project, which aimed to develop nuclear bombs that could explode in the atmosphere to "fry" incoming Soviet missiles.

To calm critics, James Schlesinger, who was chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission at the time, took his wife and two daughters to Amchitka for the test, not-

ing that "it's fun for the kids, and my wife is delighted to get away from the house for a while."

Although the blast occurred far underground, it jolted Earth's crust so violently that it killed sea otters, either by rupturing their lungs or "driving their eyeballs through the bone behind their sockets," said the 35-page Greenpeace report, released Wednesday.

The bomb was detonated slightly more than a mile deep, which was 1,000 feet too high for safety, said report authors Miller and Norman Buske. As a result, the ground just above the explosion collapsed, forming a mile-wide, 60-foot-deep crater on the surface above the blast. The crater has turned into a lake, now called Cannikin Lake.

Miller and Buske visited Amchitka Island for six days in June, taking soil, water and plant samples. Then, they analyzed the samples, checking specifically for two possible signs of radioactivity:

emissions of gamma radiation and "alpha" particles.

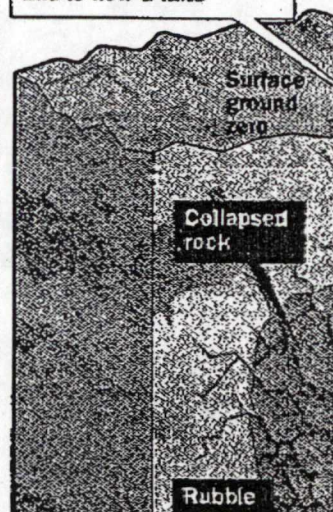
They found evidence that the highly toxic radioactive substance — plutonium-239, plutonium-240 and americium-241 — were "leaking from the Cannikin blast cavity into White Alice Creek and Bering Sea."

After meeting with Greenpeace representatives in Washington Tuesday, Grumbley vowed that agency officials would "immedi-

CANNIKIN BLAST

The environmental group Greenpeace says radioactivity is leaking into the Bering Sea from a 25-year-old underground nuclear bomb test site on Amchitka Island

Mile-wide 60-foot-deep crater formed on surface and is now a lake



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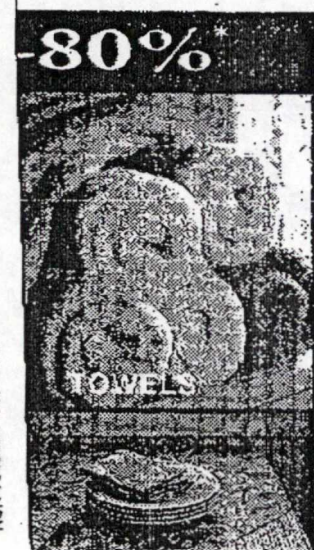
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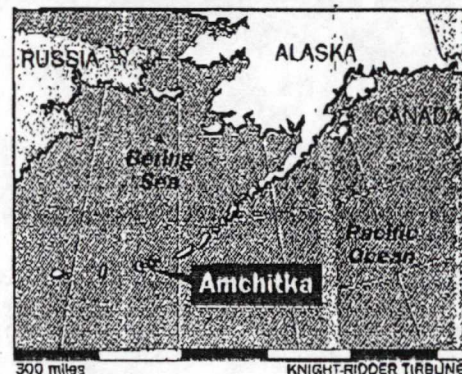
ly go back and take a look at all the
data and all the records relevant to
the Amchitka (nuclear tests)."

Should any Amchitka docu-
ments remain classified, the agen-
cy will declassify them, he added.

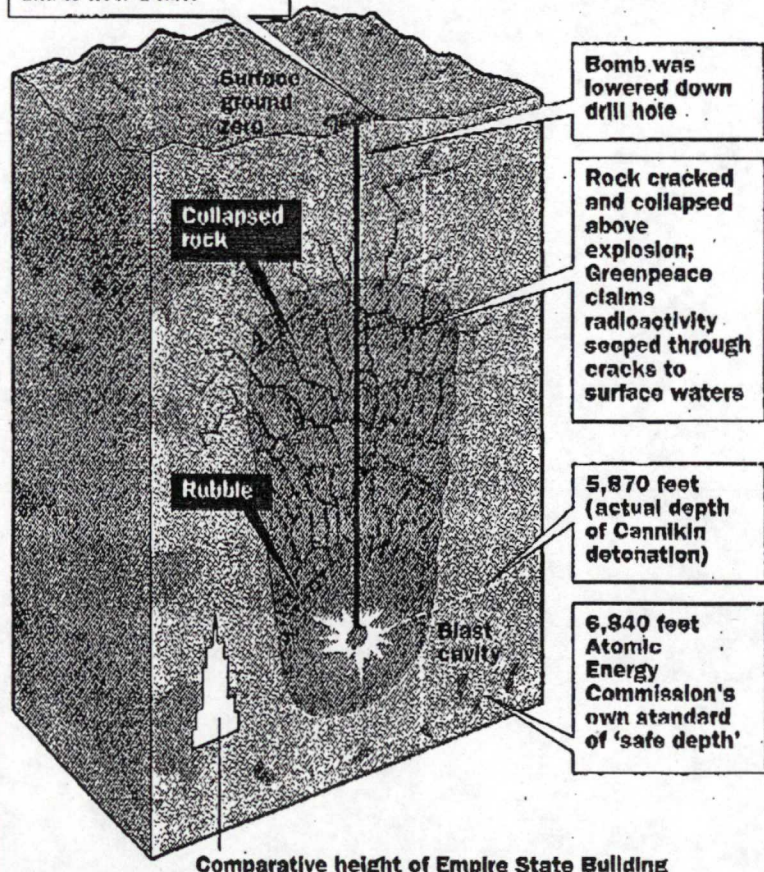
Miller is former technical coord-
inator for ocean issues for the
state of Washington. Buske is di-
rector of the Nuclear Military
Monitoring project launched by
the San Francisco-based Tides
Foundation.

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SOURCE: Greenpeace

EXAMINER GRAPHICS

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